Center for Immigration Studies

Backgrounder

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Elite vs. Public Opinion

An Examination of Divergent Views on Immigration

By Roy Beck and Steven A. Camarota

While it has long been suspected that public and elite opinion differ on the issue of immigration, a new poll provides the most compelling evidence yet that there is an enormous gap between the American people and "opinion leaders" on the issue. The survey also suggests that the gap between the public and elites has actually widened since the September 11terrorist attacks.

This *Backgrounder* is based on the findings of a recent national poll conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations in May through July of this year. The Council is a non-profit policy organization that sponsors polls and events on a host of foreign policy issues. The Council has a long tradition of polling to find differences between the public and opinion leaders.

The polling of the public was based on 2,800 telephone interviews from across the nation. The council also surveyed nearly 400 opinion leaders, including members of Congress, the administration, and leaders of church groups, business executives, union leaders, journalists, academics, and leaders of major interest groups.(The full results of the survey can be found at http://www.worldviews.org/detailreports/usreport/html/ch5s5.html) This *Backgrounder* is the first detailed examination of the poll's results on the issue of immigration.

- The results of the survey indicate that the gap between the opinions of the American people on immigration and those of their leaders is enormous. The poll found that 60 percent of the public regards the present level of immigration to be a "critical threat to the vital interests of the United States," compared to only 14 percent of the nation's leadership – a 46 percentage point gap.

- The current gap is even wider than that found in 1998, when 55 percent of the public viewed immigration as a "critical threat," compared to 18 percent of opinion leaders – a 37 percentage point gap.

- The poll results indicate that there is no other foreign policy-related issue on which the American people and their leaders disagreed more profoundly than immigration. Even on such divisive issues as globalization or strengthening the United Nations, the public and the elite are much closer together than they are on immigration.

- When asked a specific question about whether legal immigration should be reduced, kept the same, or increased, 55 percent of the public said it should be reduced, and 27 percent said it should remain the same. In contrast, only 18 percent of opinion leaders said it should be reduced and 60 percent said it should remain the same. There was no other issue-specific question on which the public and elites differed more widely.

- The enormous difference between elite and public opinion can also be seen on the issue of illegal immigration. The survey found that 70 percent of the public said that reducing illegal immigration should be a "very important" foreign-policy goal of the United States, compared to only 22 percent of elites.

- Also with respect to illegal immigration, when the public was asked to rank the biggest foreign policy problems, the public ranked illegal immigration sixth, while elites ranked it 26th.

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- The very large difference between elite and public opinion explains the current political stalemate on immigration. For example, supporters of an amnesty for illegal immigrants have broad elite support ranging from religious to business and union leaders. Normally elite support of this kind would lead to policy changes, but on this issue public opposition is so strong that it creates a political stalemate.

- Continued deep public dissatisfaction with current immigration policy indicates that candidates or political parties that advocate a reduction in immigration might reap a significant political benefit. This is especially true because it could be marketed as "anti-elite" and more in sync with the American people, a message that has traditionally been well received by voters.

- President Bush's efforts to grant amnesty to illegal immigrants appear to be hurting him politically. While 53 percent of the public said his handling of foreign policy overall was excellent or good, on immigration only 27 percent said his handling of immigration was good or excellent; moreover, 70 percent rated Bush as poor or fair on immigration. the lowest rating he received on any foreign policy-related issue.

Methodology

For many years the Chicago Council has polled to find differences between the public and "opinion leaders." Harris Interactive conducted the poll for the Council. The polling of the public included 2,862 telephone interviews from a scientific sampling of the nation in June. In addition, 397 telephone interviews were conducted with opinion leaders between May and July of this year. Included in the survey of leaders were: top executives of the Fortune 1000 corporations; presidents of the largest labor unions; TV and radio news directors, network newscasters, newspaper editors and columnists; leaders of all religious faiths, chosen proportionate to the number of Americans who worship in each; presidents of large special interest groups and think tanks with an emphasis on foreign policy matters; presidents and faculty of universities; members of the U.S. House and Senate; and assistant secretaries and other senior staff in the Administration. In this *Backgrounder,* the terms "elite" and "leaders" are used synonymously with "opinion leaders."

Wide Gap Between Public and Elite

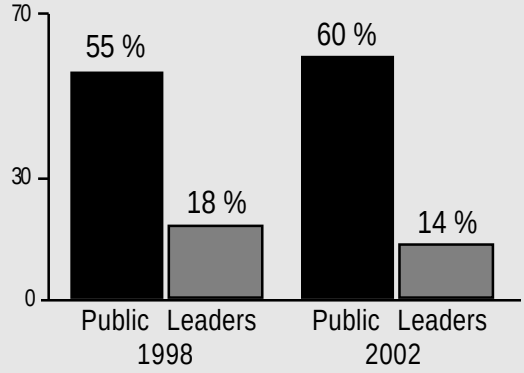
It is a well established fact in public opinion polling that most Americans for nearly all of the last quarter century have desired reductions in legal and illegal immigration. However, in general, federal lawmakers have moved in the opposite direction of their constituents' desires, continually raising the numerical level of legal immigration and failing to take steps to reduce illegal migration.

Some commentators thought that after the September 11 attacks members of Congress might move toward the opinion of their constituents. The findings of the new poll indicate why there has been no effort to reduce immigration. While 60 percent of the public is apparently concerned by the number of foreign nationals being allowed into the country, (see Figure 1) since the terrorist attacks of last year, federal officials have continually advocated policies that would likely increase the flow of immigration – or at least embraced policies that indicate little desire to enforce immigration laws. For example:

- Dick Gephardt, then-House Democratic Minority Leader, proposed in October 2002 an amnesty for most of the 8.5 million illegal aliens in the country. The White House has also indicated its desire for amnesty, although at least so far only the three to four million illegal aliens from Mexico would be eligible. The administration also wishes to create a new guest worker program for Mexicans.

- President George W. Bush has repeatedly pressured Congress to pass an amnesty for perhaps 500,000

Figure 1. Change in Perception of Leaders and the Public 1998-2002: Percent Seeing Immigration as a Critical Threat



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to a million illegal aliens under a provision known as Section 245(i).

- Utah Republicans Sen. Orin Hatch and Rep. Chris Cannon are leading a vigorous effort to let illegal aliens pay in-state tuition to attend college.

- Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) succeeded in moving a bill through the House Judiciary Committee to make it much easier for immigrants convicted of felonies to remain in the United States.

- Senate Democrats inserted without debate into the Homeland Security bill provisions that reversed changes to asylum procedures enacted in 1996. The changes would have again allowed a larger share of applicants for asylum to be paroled into the country rather than remaining in detention.

Anybody confused about how federal leadership could advocate policies that so boldly contradict the public's desire after the 9/11 attacks can find substantial explanation in the Chicago Council of Foreign Relations' polling

Table 1. Percentage of Elites and the Public Viewing Foreign-Policy Issues as a Threat to the United States*

Foreign-Policy Threats to Vital U.S. Interests	Difference in the Percentage of the Public Vs. Elites Who Think Issue Is a Critical Threat	Elite Opinion			Public Opinion		
		Critical Threat	Important, but Not Critical	Not Important	Critical Threat	Important, but Not Critical	Not Important
Large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming to the U.S.	**46**	**14**	**45**	**41**	**60**	**31**	**8**
Economic competition from low-wage countries	24	7	49	44	31	44	24
Economic competition from Japan	24	5	48	47	29	53	16
AIDS, the Ebola virus, and other potential epidemics	20	48	49	3	68	29	3
Chemical and biological weapons	19	67	31	2	86	12	2
World population growth	19	25	58	17	44	42	12
Global warming	18	28	52	20	46	33	17
The military power of Russia	16	7	51	42	23	57	20
Civil wars in Africa	15	9	65	25	24	48	23
Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction	14	72	25	3	86	11	1
Possibility of unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers	13	72	26	2	85	12	2
Financial crises in other countries	11	14	77	8	25	56	18
The development of China as a world power	9	47	47	6	56	34	8
International terrorism	8	83	16	1	91	7	2
Globalization	7	22	48	28	29	44	15
Economic competition form Europe	4	9	58	33	13	63	22
Political turmoil in Russia	1	26	65	9	27	58	13
Islamic fundamentalism	0	61	36	3	61	24	8
Military conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors	-6	73	26	1	67	27	5
Tensions between India and Pakistan	-7	61	38	1	54	36	7

* Persons who said they were unsure about the threat are not included in the table.
The full results of the survey can be found at http://www.worldviews.org/detailreports/usreport/html/ch5s5.html

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of both the public and the country's leadership. The results indicate that although federal officials are not following the desires of the public, they are very much in tune with the views of the top leaders of America's institutions.

Among scores of questions about all kinds of foreign policy issues, interviewers used this wording: "I am going to read to you a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please tell me if you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all." The responses concerning immigration and other issues are shown in Table 1 (Page 3).

As already discussed, 60 percent of the public, compared to 14 percent of elites, think that immigration is a critical threat to the nation. Table 1 shows that the 46-percentage-point gap in the attitudes of elites is by far the largest. The next largest gap between opinion leaders and the public is only about half as large (24 percentage points) and addresses the issues of competition with low-wage countries and Japan.

In addition to the 60 percent who see immigration as a critical threat, another 31 percent thought the issue was important but not critical. Thus, only a tiny minority of the American people (8 percent) remain unconcerned by the large number of people currently allowed into the country. In contrast, 41 percent of opinion leaders do not find the influx to be an important threat at all. In other words, opinion leaders are five times more likely than members of the public to find the size of the influx to be unimportant as a threat. Table 1 shows that among the 20 threats posed to the leaders, the "not important" rating for immigration was higher than for all but the threats from the military power of Russia, and from the economic competition from Japan and from low-wage nations. Immigration is simply not on the radar of the elite, whereas the public seems to be quite concerned about the issue.

Of course, some segment of the elite does see the issue as an important threat. Table 1 shows that 45 percent of opinion leaders see it as important but not critical. Overall, 59 percent of opinion leader compared to 91 percent of the public believe that the size of the foreign flow into the United States is at least an "important" or "critical" issue. But of course, because political pressure for change tends to come from those with intense feelings, only those who judge the threat

Table 2. Percent of Elites and the Public Who Think Various Foreign-Policy Goals Should Be Very Important, Ranked by Difference Between Public and Elite Opinion

Foreign-Policy Goal	Difference in the Percentage of the Public Vs. Elites Who Think Goal Is Very Important	Percent of Elites Who Think Goal is Very Important	Percent of Public Who Think Goal is Very Important
Protecting the jobs of American workers	50%	35%	85%
Controlling and reducing illegal immigration	**48%**	**22%**	**70%**
Stopping the flow of illegal drugs into the U.S.	36%	45%	81%
Reducing our trade deficit with foreign countries	30%	21%	51%
Strengthening the United Nations	29%	28%	57%
Protecting the interests of American business abroad	26%	23%	49%
Securing adequate supplies of energy	24%	51%	75%
Improving the global environment	23%	43%	66%
Maintaining superior military power worldwide	16%	52%	68%
Protecting weaker nations against aggression	14%	27%	41%
Promoting market economies abroad	9%	27%	36%
Safeguarding against global financial instability	5%	49%	54%
Combating international terrorism	4%	87%	91%
Combating world hunger	2%	59%	61%
Defending our allies' security	2%	55%	57%
Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons	1%	89%	90%
Helping to bring a democratic form of government to other nations	1%	33%	34%
Promoting and defending human rights in other counties	1%	46%	47%
Strengthening international law and institutions	-6%	49%	43%
Helping to improve the standard of living of less developed nations	-12%	42%	30%

* Persons who said they were unsure about the threat are not included in the table.
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as "critical" are likely to act. And as we have seen, those opinion leaders who see it as a critical threat are outnumbered 3-1 by those who see no threat.

The huge difference in public and elite perception also exists on the issue of illegal immigration. Table 2 shows the share of the elite and the public who think reducing illegal immigration should be an important foreign policy goal of the United States. The goals are ranked based on the percentage-point difference between the public and opinion leaders. The second largest difference between the public and elite is found on the issue of reducing illegal immigration. In fact, the 48-percentage-point difference found in Table 2 is only slightly smaller than the 50 percentage point gap that exist on the issue of protecting the jobs of American workers. Taken together the results in Tables 1 and 2 indicate that there are few if any issues on which the American people and elites differ more profoundly than on immigration.

Changes in Perception

One of the most interesting findings in the poll of elites is that there has not been any increase in concern among America's opinion leaders on the issue of immigration. The Chicago Council's sampling of leaders was designed to replicate the cross-section of leaders polled in previous years so that changes could be tracked over time. Figure 1 shows the percentage of the public and opinion leaders who thought "large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States" was a "critical threat to the vital interests of the United States" in 1998 and 2002. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by foreign-born terrorists seem to have increased the share of the public concerned about immigration. In contrast, elite concern has actually declined since 1998. Thus the gap between elite and public opinion widened from an already large 37 points in 1998 to 46 points in 2002.

It should be noted that concern over immigration was higher for both elites and the public in 1994. This was only one year after the first bombing of the World Trade Center, and the nation was also just coming out of recession. In 1994, 72 percent of the public and 31 percent of elites thought immigration was a critical threat. However, it should be noted that the gap between elite and public opinion is now larger than in 1994.

By 1998 the country was in the middle of an economic expansion, and concern over terrorism had receded. As a result, the share of the public concerned about immigration dropped dramatically to 55 percent among the public and to 18 percent for leaders. The larger share of the elite concerned about immigration in 1994 goes a long way toward explaining why the chief debate after the first World Trade Center bombing was primarily about measures to reduce legal and illegal immigration. In the end, a few new restrictions were placed on illegal migration while measures to reduce legal immigration were set aside, but there were no debates at the time about whether to increase immigration.

Today, however, members of Congress are hearing from opinion leaders who tip in the opposite way: As shown in Table 1, the portion viewing immigration as a critical threat is only one-third the size of the portion seeing it as unimportant (14 percent vs. 41 percent). Perhaps as a result, members of Congress now are primarily debating measures to increase immigration.

Political Leaders Respond to Elites

As is the case with most public policy issues, immigration policy is primarily shaped by opinion leaders. The fact that leaders seemingly have not changed their views on immigration since September 11th goes a long way to explaining why Congress and the President have reacted to the 9/11 attacks so much more favorably with respect to immigration policy than might have been expected Of course, this leads to two questions: Why have academics and media officials, union and corporate executives, religious and think tank leaders so disconnected these acts of terrorism from their views of immigration? Or conversely, why has the public attached these terrorist acts with immigration?

Whatever the answer to these questions, the results of the polling indicate that if the public is to win the immigration policies it desires, it will have to deliver its opinion directly to members of Congress at a noise level sufficient to drown out the leaders of most of the country's institutions. Citizens may also need to engage the leaders of their own unions, religious organizations, alumni associations, and special interest groups and their local media to at least create enough division to muffle those leaders' voices that are currently so strongly in favor of expanding immigration numbers. Alternatively, for those who would like to increase immigration, or who oppose efforts to reduce illegal immigration, it is important that they petition Congress for changes while attracting as little public attention

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as possible. Given public opposition, the more aware the public becomes of efforts to increase immigration, the less likely such changes will pass Congress.

Does Immigration Matter to the Public?

The public may feel that immigration is a threat, but are those feelings sufficiently strong to make a concerted effort to push for changes? One common assumption is that citizens do not act on their opinions about an issue unless that issue is one of the two or three most important issues to them. The polling by the Chicago Council indicates the American public may be approaching that point regarding immigration, but it is not there yet.

When the public was asked in an open-ended question to name two or three of the biggest problems facing the country, "too many immigrants" was listed 13th of 65 general concerns mentioned. When asked about the nation's two or three biggest foreign policy problems, the public listed illegal immigration as the sixth out of 69 concerns. Immigration appears to be on the public mind, though not its highest concern.

Another place where we can gauge the saliency of immigration is by comparing responses on a series of questions dealing with foreign policy goals. As shown in Table 2, both the public and elites were asked if certain foreign policy goals should be "important," "somewhat important," or "not important" to the United States. The 70 percent of the public who said "reducing illegal immigration" should be an important foreign policy goal made it the sixth highest of the 20 goals the Council asked about. In fact, Table 2 shows that a larger share of the public said reducing illegal immigration was important than said such goals as "maintaining superior military power worldwide," and "improving the global environment" were important. Again, the results in Table 2 suggest that illegal immigration may be a issue that is close to being sufficiently salient to move Americans to actively push for changes in policy.

Interestingly, Table 2 shows that most of the goals which a large share of the public said were important are goals that are at least partly related to concerns about illegal immigration. Certainly, those Americans promoting more controls against illegal immigration include as their rationale that such controls are necessary and helpful in keeping terrorists out of the country, protecting the jobs of American workers, and stopping the flow of illegal drugs into the U.S.

Another indication that the public could act – or be mobilized to act – on its desires for reduced immigration is that Americans appear to be aware that President Bush's immigration policy is quite different from their desires for better controls on the immigration flow and for overall reductions in the numbers. The public was asked to rate President Bush's performance in 13 foreign policy areas as "excellent," "good," "fair" or "poor." When asked about the President's "overall foreign policy" performance, 53 percent of the public said his handling of foreign policy overall was "excellent" or "good." On immigration however, only 27 percent said his handling of the issue was good or excellent. Also only 13 percent of the public rated his overall handling of foreign policy as "poor," but on immigration, 41 percent rated the President as "poor," another 29 percent said it was "fair," and 3 percent said they were unsure. The 70 percent rating for "poor" or "fair" was the most negative rating Bush recieved on any issue. Given the public's view of immigration, it seems very likely that the public's low rating of Bush on immigration reflects his desire to grant amnesty to illegal immigrants and his general unwillingness to reduce immigration.

It seems very likely that public opposition is the primary reason the President and congressional Democrats have failed to persuade the rest of Congress to go along with increases that are not even supported by the majority of opinion leaders (21 percent). However, efforts to reduce immigration, such as the SAFER Act (H.R. 5013), have also not generated broad support in Congress. As shown in Table 3, this reluctance of members of Congress to embrace reductions in legal immigration matches the desires of 60 percent of opinion leaders who want legal immigration to remain at its current level of more than a million a year. That contrasts with 55 percent of the public who want reductions and 27 percent who want

Table 3. What Should Be Done With the Flow of *Legal* Immigration

	Decreased	Kept at Present Level	Increased
Public	55 %	27 %	15 %
Leaders	18 %	60 %	21 %

* Persons who said they were unsure are not included in the table.
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it to remain the same. It should also be noted that the difference between elite and public opinion in Table 3 is, not surprisingly, one of the widest gaps found in a series of questions dealing with specific topics. Direct comparison on these specific questions cannot be made as was done in Tables 1 and 2 because each question is structured differently. Nonetheless, it does appear that the gap on legal immigration is one of the largest found on any specific issue examined in the survey.

On illegal immigration, the nation's opinion leaders have generally accepted the Bush administration's disinterest, like that of the previous administration, in enforcing most laws against illegal immigration or in reviving interior enforcement programs of the INS. This, of course, is to be expected because only 22 percent (Table 2) of elites thought reducing illegal immigration should be an important goal of the United States.

With virtually no opinion leaders to represent or mobilize the public's majority opinion against illegal immigration, the President and the former House Democratic Minority Leader may be able to pursue the desire for more immigration without suffering politically. But the Chicago Council's poll shows that the public holds strong opinions that will make it difficult for anyone trying to increase immigration.

Why Do Elites and Public Diverge?

The survey by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations provides one of the most in-depth looks at attitudes about immigration among the public and elites. While the large divergence between the two groups on the issue has long been suspected, the Council's survey provides the clearest evidence to date that the public and nation's leaders have very different points of view on immigration. But what accounts for the large difference between the public and opinion leaders?

Table 2 provides some clues. As already discussed, the table shows that one of the largest differences between the share of the public compared to leaders who think an issue is important is in the area of illegal immigration. The table also shows that a similarly large gap exists on the issue of protecting the jobs of American workers. This strongly suggests that one of the main reasons the public is concerned about illegal immigration, but the elite is not, stems from the economic situation of the two groups. Opinion leaders are overwhelmingly educated and, compared to the public, much more affluent. Thus it's not surprising that they see little threat from illegal immigration. It should also be recalled from Table 1 that when asked about what constitutes a "critical threat" to the country the second largest gap, after immigration, between the public and elites was on the issues of economic competition from low-wage countries and Japan. Thus, while the public is clearly concerned about its jobs and economic livelihood, opinion leaders see no threat because they have jobs in which they face relatively little competition from immigrants. Tables 1 and 2 strongly suggest that at least part of the reason for the large difference between the public and the elites on immigration reflects the class interests of the two groups. However, the huge difference between the public and opinion leaders on the issue of immigration is an important social phenomenon and is clearly an area in need of further exploration. What we can say from this data is that the gap is large, persistent over time, and may in fact be growing.

Conclusion

The polling by the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs points to the likelihood that Congress looks to opinion leaders and not to the public for direction on immigration issues. It is for this reason that those who have been pushing for increased immigration have had some success in Congress since the September 11th terrorist attacks. However, Congress is not entirely unaware of the public's apprehension over current immigration, as shown in this survey. As a result, there has been a good deal of political stalemate on the issue.

The enormous gulf between the public and elites on the issue indicates that the debate over immigration will continue to be characterized by stalemate. On an issue of such obvious importance as immigration it would be desirable if the country could come to some consensus on policy. This survey suggests that such a consensus is extremely unlikely. If anything, the evidence suggests that the gap between the American people and their leaders is growing. It is unclear how long immigration policy can remain so divergent from public opinion. It seems likely that at some point a politician or group of politicians will attempt to mobilize public support for a reduction in immigration. The evidence summarized in this *Backgrounder* indicates that if this were to happen, a candidate could expect very strong support from the public, but also very significant elite opposition from politically important groups such as the media, business, and academia, all of whom will play a significant role in shaping policy and the public discourse on the issue.

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